

## **Forest Certification in Tasmania**

### **Dr Hans Drielsma, Forestry Tasmania<sup>1</sup>**

The recent downturn in Japanese sales of Tasmanian pulpwood has brought many new challenges for forest managers and processors, not the least of which has been forest certification and its influence on how products are marketed.

The majority of Tasmania's production forests are certified to the Australian Forestry Standard (AFS), including all forests managed by Forestry Tasmania, Gunns, Timberlands and Norske Skog. This reflects the position in Australia generally, where close to 10 million hectares are AFS certified, encompassing virtually all of the public State forest estates, and a large part of the private corporate estate. In fact, more than 90 percent of Australia's timber production capacity is AFS certified.

The Forest Stewardship Council, or FSC, provides another option for certification. There are currently no FSC certified forests in Tasmania, although some growers are now investigating. Across Australia there are in the order of a half million hectares of FSC certified forest. These are essentially all plantations, including some that have both FSC and AFS certification. There are no significant areas of native forest FSC certified following VicForests unsuccessful attempts to achieve it in 2008/09.

#### **How do AFS and FSC compare?**

There is much confusion, about the differences between AFS and FSC certification and their respective merits.

In essence they derive from very similar frameworks of Sustainable Forest Management, cover essentially the same concepts and are committed to the same end, ie sustainable forest management. Each is based on independent third party verification, by accredited certifiers, and provide secure chain-of-custody and labelling systems for verification of wood origins through the supply chain to final customers. There are some differences in labelling rules, the most significant being that AFS requires a minimum 70 percent certified content in all products, whereas, FSC provides for content down to 10 percent in certain circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Drielsma is Executive General Manager, Forestry Tasmania, and also a member of the Boards of AFS Ltd and PEFC International.

FSC has been developed as an international standard and it is often suggested that this results in greater uniformity of requirements around the globe. However, FSC has to be 'interpreted' for local implementation and requires the development of national or regional standards to reflect global variation in biophysical and socio-economic contexts, which appropriately reduces this uniformity. In practice, few such national/regional standards have been developed, and around half of all FSC certifications, including all those in Australia have been against auditor developed interim<sup>2</sup> case specific standards, further weakening this argument.

AFS has been developed as a national standard, the only one for Australia, to reflect Australian forest ecology and legislative contexts, and therefore achieving significant local fit-for-purpose. It however conforms to, and has been formally endorsed against the sustainability benchmark of PEFC (the Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification ensuring international consistency. PEFC is the world's largest certification framework with 220 million hectares of certified forest.

Both systems approach regional flexibility and global consistency from different directions, but to the same end. It is fair to say that the PEFC approach maintains a stronger element of national ownership and recognition of national sovereignty, and it is the reason why so many countries (35 to date) have chosen this path. For historical reasons, they have approached the shared objective of sustainable forest management using different processes. However, there is growing consensus amongst key stakeholders, including the forestry industry, government procurement policies, international institutions and corporate customers, that both schemes offer equivalent assurance of well managed forests<sup>3</sup>.

AFS has been developed within the national standards system, and therefore within ISO/IAF protocols which require the strict separation of powers between standards setting (AFS), certification (certification bodies) and certifier accreditation (JAS-ANZ). This ensures that

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<sup>2</sup> These are developed by individual certification bodies with limited stakeholder consultation.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.pefc.co.uk/index.php/news-page/publications-a-documentation/brochures-a-toolkits/item/53-pefc-and-fsc-global-sustainable-forest-management-certification-schemes> for a useful discussion of PEFC and FSC differences and similarities. Also <http://www.pefc.org/index.php/about-pefc/what-makes-pefc-unique> is a useful reference.

standards are implemented and verified on a fully objective basis, without undue influence from interested parties involved in the standards setting itself. FSC has developed its own internal governance arrangements, and this separation of powers is not evident.

## **Common myths**

*Myth: AFS has been developed by the forest industry.* FACT: AFS was developed under accreditation by Standards Australia, in conformity with international protocols for standards development and balanced representation of interests. FSC standards are developed under similar rules established by FSC International. Both incorporate industry and environmental interests in standards development.

*Myth: AFS is a system standard without specific performance requirements.* FACT: There is no evidentiary basis for any distinction between the two standards on this count. The scope and requirements of each standard are expressed in very similar terms, and both incorporate system and specific performance requirements.

*Myth: FSC does not certify native forests.* FACT: Quite the contrary, FSC was originally set up to promote sustainable forest management of natural tropical forests, and certifies natural forests around the world. FSC also certifies oldgrowth harvest and clearfelling operations in many parts of the world. The Canadian boreal forests are a good example, where it is reported that one of the largest clearcuts in the world is found in an FSC certified forest and where harvesting of oldgrowth, including variable retention, is also FSC certified.

*Myth: AFS permits chemical uses prohibited under FSC.* FACT: FSC prohibits certain chemicals, such as symazine and 1080, but then provides exemptions where these are found to be critical to successful forest management. AFS more transparently allows chemical use, but requires minimisation strategies. Both seek the same outcomes. Interestingly, there is not a single chemical used by AFS certified entities in Australia that is not also approved for use by FSC certified entities.

*Myth: Only FSC protects High Conservation Value Forests.* FACT: Both AFS and FSC have provisions that require the identification and protection of significant conservation values. In FSC the reference is to High Conservation Value Forests (HCVF), whereas in AFS it is to Significant Biological Diversity Values (SBDV).

## **Conclusion**

There are both similarities and differences between the two forest certification systems operating in Australia, but both provide credible assurance of sustainable forest management. This provides healthy choice for forest growers, processors, and sellers of forest products, reflecting their particular requirements, or those expressed by their markets and customers. Competition between systems encourages continuous improvement, and provides legitimate choice avoiding monopoly power and keeping both focussed on providing effective and efficient outcomes without undue influence of any particular interest.